

A dhaoine chóra, fellow citizens,

Tá fíorchaoín áthais orm, mar Uachtarán na hÉireann, a bheith anseo anocht chun na saoránaigh cróga a ghlac páirt in Éirí Amach 1916 - an síol as a d'fhás ár neamhspleáchas - a chomóradh.

I am delighted, as President of Ireland, to be here this evening to commemorate all those brave citizens who played a part in the 1916 Rising and thus were part of the founding moments from which our independence and our present state flowed.

May I commence by thanking the many descendants and relatives of the participants in the 1916 Rising who have gathered here today to honour their brave ancestors. All of you here this evening share, and represent at a unique and personal level, the significance of the actions taken by those with whom you have a relationship. While this occasion is one of pride in citizenship for you it is also one of family and intimacy. Yours is a special relationship to the founding moments of our State and to the creation of the independent Ireland we now enjoy. I am privileged and proud to share this event with you.

Some of those present are related to the leaders of the Rising, now immortalised in the history books of Ireland as the signatories of the Proclamation or as leaders of the participating organisations. Others amongst you represent the many quiet, unsung heroes who moved around the streets of Dublin on that seismic Easter Monday. Names like Lily Kempson, Walter Bell, James Maguire, Daniel Brophy, Margaret Quinn, and Patrick English may not have been perpetuated in the names of our streets and buildings, or in songs, poems and films of the period, but they and many others, of every rank and skill, played their own unique, brave and significant role on the streets and in the buildings of Dublin, during that April week that would change Ireland's history for ever.

Whatever the valued memory or connection that has brought you here, all of you in this room share a direct link to the people who, some with more preparation than others, took to the streets of Dublin on Easter Monday 1916 to make a demand for independence and to call for an end to Empire and the consequences of Imperialism. Those who participated were men and women who risked everything in their different ways, by occupying main buildings in the city, by moving ammunition around its streets, dodging snipers in order to carry messages or transport food and medical supplies to where they were needed, and undertaking the many other essential tasks in a city fighting for freedom and inspired by the declaration of a Republic.

For all of us citizens today theirs are stories of great bravery, vision and determination; but they were also, for their loved ones, their dependents, stories tinged with sadness, loss and separation. The human price paid should not ever be forgotten, should remind us of the great debt of gratitude we owe to all of those who bravely risked their lives a hundred years ago so that future generations of Ireland could grow up as citizens of a free and independent State. Those sacrifices by your forebears are, for all Irish citizens, a source of inspiration and patriotic

pride, but they are for you, in addition, personal stories of family experience, choices made that had meaning and consequences that have a special meaning for your families.

Across a distance of time there is the danger that we might lose the human essence of the lives of the men and women who changed the course of our history, or perhaps at a distance be inclined to interpret their actions solely through a prism of accounts of major political or constitutional change tonight we have the opportunity to give correct place to the intimate human dimension of the Easter Rising and the sacrifices made by so many of those who helped to build our nation.

I often think of Lily Connolly's words to her husband James when she and her daughter Nora visited him on the eve of his execution - 'But your beautiful life James'.

Cuireann bhur láithreacht i gcuimhne dom an baol agus na hÍobairtí a ghlac na fir agus na mná a raibh páirteach san Éirí Amach orthu féin. Ní rabhadar cinnte faoin toradh a bheadh ar an Éirí Amach agus ní rabhadar ag súil le maireachtáil chun an toradh sin a fheiceáil, is é sin Éire saor.

[Your presence calls to mind the risks and sacrifices of the men and women who became involved in the Rising. They may have been uncertain of its outcome and without expectation of living to see what could be subsequently achieved in the name of Irish freedom.]

This gathering of the descendants who of those who took part in demanding and seeking to establish our freedom is a gathering of those families who grew up with the memory and lingering sense of a lost loved one. An occasion such as this gives us the opportunity to shine a light on an often-forgotten chapter in the story of 1916 and the War of Independence, the layers of grief and loss and the final farewells that had to be borne and cast long shadows across families for so many years. We are all indebted to those historians, and the families whose work made possible this new and necessary understanding.

For example, when we remember Thomas McDonagh we should not just recall his role as Commandant taking control of Jacobs' biscuit factory, but we should remember him as a young man and father whose daughter woke up and put her arms around his neck as he said his last goodbye to her on Easter Sunday night.

Pádraig Pearse's final words to his mother before he was executed ' "I will call to you in my heart at the last moment' are words that for many will echo as strongly across the years as the memory of his reading of the Proclamation in front of the GPO at four minutes past noon on Easter Monday afternoon.

Má smaoinimid orthu mar aithreacha agus mar dheartháireacha, mar iníonacha agus mar leannáin, mar a dhéanaimid anocht, tá sé níos éasca orainn tuiscint a fháil ar a saolta roimh an Éirí Amach agus le linn an Éirí Amach féin.

[Thinking of them as fathers and brothers, daughters and lovers, as we do tonight, allows us to place ourselves more easily in their lives and to appreciate the experiences they lived through in the lead-up to, and during, the Rising.]

The key actors in the Rising were not abstract or mythical figures; they were living, and particularly conscious poets, academics, journalists and civil servants; city clerks and shopkeepers; rural farmers and labourers; Catholics and Protestants, whose voices made the call for a new and re-imagined Ireland.

When we read the first hand accounts they have been made available to us, we are presented with a real sense of what it was to live in Dublin in the early 20th century.

That period between the 1910s and the 1920s, now known as the 'revolutionary decade', was a vibrant episode in Irish history. Far from the imagined homogenous and insular Ireland with which we are often presented the Ireland of that time, while it was a hotbed of creativity, and with articulated demands for civic participation, a time of passionate public discourse; it was also deeply class divided. The teeming tenements in the abandoned Georgian settings were locations of the worst poverty in the adjacent empire which was less than a half day's travel away; 5,000 tenements were home to 87,000 people, comprising 26,000 families. Of those families 20,000 lived in just one room. In the suburbs the previous occupants of Georgian Dublin, many of them landlords charging rents that would secure a small house in Britain, in the words of Patrick Pearse, 'prepared for Summer tennis'. In rural Ireland consolidation of land holding was under way and a grazier class was seeking political influence.

Today we view the Rising as being synonymous with republicanism, but that of course was not a dominant ideology at the time; even if it was understood, and deliberately included in the Proclamation by Pearse and Connolly who were very well aware not just of its historical and contemporary significance but of its emancipatory promise. Some of those who sought independence we should remember were seeking an Irish freedom that could have facilitated the expansion of commerce, as easily as a republic.

Even amongst some of those ranks of the Irish Volunteers, whose rhetoric was republican in tone, many were honestly motivated by a desire to counter the unionist threat to home rule which was to secure their recent and invaluable gains in security of land tenure.

What they sought was freedom to feel secure in the holdings for which they had been ground into insecurity, poverty and emigration.

Then too, some of the rebels recorded their surprise when they learned that a republic had, in fact, been declared in the Proclamation. The signatories understood the spirit and meaning of what was a Republic in the sense of the enlightenment, the French Revolution and the American Revolution. The loss of Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, who had brought an egalitarian, Workers' rights emphasis into the Citizen Army Volunteer relationship, whose coming together is rejected in the language of the Proclamation, would become all the more

evident in years that followed with the difficulties that would be placed before the drafting of the Democratic Programme of the Dáil in 1919, the minimalism of the 1922 Constitution which could not carry the language of Pearse and Connolly, and indeed the deep institutional conservatism of the early decades of the State.

The Ireland of the early twentieth century was a complex place where the shops, restaurants and back rooms of radical Dublin were alive with to the conversations of a dynamic mixture of feminists, socialists, radicals, nationalists, anti imperialists and the many other ideologists compelled, in their different ways, to dream of a new and better Ireland, and they cared for each other. They were able to differ with dignity and respect for each others' views. Constance Markievicz would ask her sister Eva Gore Booth to visit Agnes Mallen because she had a house of children and would need keep. Evan would in turn write to Hannah Sheehy Skeffington who while a pacifist still brought provisions to those in the Insurrection.

Some of you here today may be related to the nationalist families who socialised in the church halls and pub rooms around Clanbrassil street and Harolds Cross, others to the middle class radicals, pacifists, suffragettes and feminists such as the Sheehy Skeffingtons I have mentioned, others to the cultural radicals such as the McDonaghs and the Pearses who lived in the neighbouring suburbs of Rathmines, Rathgar and Ranelagh. Others of you may be related to figures such as the cultural and artistic literati clustered around Harcourt Terrace, such as Douglas de hÍde or Sarah Purser, who had language and cultural rights as their priorities, key to the vibrant Irish Revival which they had sought to build and which inspired much of the idealism at the heart of 1916.

All of the participant in 1916 had come to perceive and recoil from what was a constant in the assumptions of the Imperialist mind that those dominated in any colony such as Ireland were lesser in human terms, in language, culture and politics. The historical evidence for this view was all around, in housing, hunger, emigration, exclusion and language loss. The cultural freedom allowed was a freedom to imitate and ingratiate.

Our road to independence stretched too, of course, beyond the capital city and thus let us not forget revolutionaries such as Waterford Quaker Rosamund Jacob, Cork journalist Liam de Roiste or Maria Carney from Belfast, friend and confidante to James Connolly, amongst the many other activists across the country who became involved, in their different ways, in building towards and participating in that foundational moment of our national history.

For the younger generation of that latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth there was the heady experience of the emergence of a great generational divide. While some young revolutionaries were coming from and continuing a strong family fenian tradition that included parliamentarianism, which had many successes in land reform and the seizing of opportunities for making the case for Home Rule let us not forget, for others such as the younger Giffords, the Plunketts and the McSwineys this was too slow and thus they were rejecting the constitutionalism of their elders in favour of revolutionism and the seeking of a war of liberation.

Even within individual families loyalties were often divided with, for example, Eamonn Ceannt's brother William fighting with the British army in France, while Eamonn fought against them in Ireland. In both cases they had expectations most profoundly and ethically held on what was for them the promise and the realisation of a better Ireland.

It is critical to our understanding of the Rising that we view it too in the broader historical context of World War I. This was, together with the Lockout of 1913, an important pretext to the Rising rather than any parallel or overshadowing event. By the early twentieth century, a pinnacle of imperialist expectation and arrogance had been reached, and the unassailability of the great European Empires, assured a century earlier at Vienna, was now under attack. The Boer War had been widely viewed in Ireland as an anti-imperial struggle, while the First World War and its rhetoric reinforced a perception that imperialism was drawing its final breath; after all six Empires would enter the war, two would emerge. The world was in a turmoil of expectation of forms of independence. As Maurice Walsh puts it in his recent 'Bitter Freedom':

'Why would Ireland have been different? According to Czech leader Tomáš Masaryk, the War had turned Europe into 'a laboratory atop a vast graveyard''

Ireland's rebellion has a global significance too, acting as it did as inspiration for independence movements around the world, particularly in other British colonies throughout the twentieth century. As Conor Mulvagh has noted V.V. Giri, who would become the fourth President of India (1969-74), came under suspicion, as a young Indian law student studying in Dublin between 1913 and 1916, and had, he claimed, a deportation order served on him.

Culture was a central element to the Rising and an inspiration for those who took part. In the years leading up to Easter 1916, the Irish had become an increasingly literate people, giving rise to an extensive readership of newspapers which allowed an alternative culture to emerge in the shape of provocative and radical Irish journalism. Journalists including Bulmer Hobson, Helena Moloney, Arthur Griffith and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington contributed polemical work to publications such as Young Ireland and United Irishman. Such papers were frequently banned by the British authorities.

To borrow from the title of Diarmuid Ferriter's recent book the cultural leaders of the revolution were concerned, not just with military or political victory, but with the elevation of the Irish people, long considered a 'rabble' to the status of a Nation.

The Irish literary revival was of course part of a profoundly progressive movement, which had seen, in rapid succession, the founding of the Land League, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League, as a generation of Irish men and women sought through such organisations to simultaneously retrieve their heritage and fashion an alternative Ireland. Myriad and intertwined connections existed between these groups at both executive and grass roots level, and it was such mutual affiliations that created the networks of the emerging political movement that was to lead us into Easter 1916.

What is astounding is the breadth of intellectual work combined with activism. James Connolly would write a play, be familiar with George Bernard Shaw's or Ibsen's work while busy with the tasks of organisation and agitation.

Bhí timpeallacht chultúrtha thar a bheith saibhir ann ag an am le leithéidí W.B. Yeats, Jack Yeats, James Joyce, George Russell agus Sean O'Casey. Ealaíontóirí agus smaointeoirí ab ea iad a bhí flaitiúil agus a bhí tiomanta do saol an phobail. Náisiúnaithe, poblachtaigh, sóisialaithe, feiminigh agus idirnáisiúnaíthe ab ea iad fir agus mná an ré sin. Theastaigh uathu Éire nua, radacach a chruthú, Éire ina mbeadh an sean-stair agus an sean-chultúr le braith inti.

[W.B. Yeats, Jack Yeats, James Joyce, George Russell, Sean O'Casey - the richness of the cultural milieu of the time is stunning. These were artists and thinkers who were generous and committed to the life of the public and the life of the community. Nationalist, republican, socialist, feminist, internationalist, - the great men and women of the period typically lived many of these roles. They dreamed of creating something new and radical in Ireland, continuous with a distinct Irish culture and history.]

All of these strands of the Rising are present in the idealism of the Proclamation which offers us a generous social and political vision, one that can still inspire us today. We should never forget that it was addressed too to the nation's women, years before women over thirty would be allowed to vote as well as its men in equal terms, as it called forth a Republic that would guarantee,:

"religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens"

Hannah Sheehy Skeffington was fulsome in her praise of James Connolly for including the equality of women regarding it as a first in an emancipatory document drafted by men.

During the passage from the Proclamation to the 1930s that egalitarian emphasis would weaken. Women would have to struggle for their equality and in that they would have the most direct connections with the women of 1916. This inheritance they invoked in the debate on Bunreacht na hÉireann in 1939.

Our nation has journeyed many miles from the shell shocked and burning Dublin of 1916. We can see that in many respects we have not fully achieved the dreams and ideals for which our forebears gave so much.

A democracy is always and must always be a work in progress, and how we use the independence we have been gifted will continue to challenge us, morally and ethically. We must ensure that our journey into the future is a collective one; one in which the homeless, the migrant, the disadvantaged, the marginalized and each and every citizen can find homes, are fellow travellers; a journey which includes all of the multitude of voices that together speak of, and for, a new Ireland born out of contemporary imagination and challenges.

So today, let us look to our past in a way that is emancipatory and transformative. Let us recognise all that was powerfully suggestive in that past as we set about constructing the foundations of a new and better Ireland.

Let us remember, with respect, not only those who have called you here today, or those Leaders whose names are indelibly etched into the history books of Ireland, but all those who lost their lives during the 1916 Rising. Of the 485 people who died, over half were civilians and forty of those civilians were children aged 16 and under; children forgotten for almost a century, but last year reclaimed.

So this evening let us remember the sung and unsung heroes of 1916, those who fought for Ireland, and those who were caught up in the events on the streets of Dublin. Let us remember all those who died or were injured in Dublin, the majority of whom were Civilians. We reflect and recall the loss suffered by all families. We recall and respect all the families who lost sons, fathers, brothers, sisters or daughters.

Inniu, tá sé de dhulgas orainn ar fad Poblacht a shamhlú agus a chruthú as a mbeadh na bunaitheoirí bródúil; náisiún cróga, le fíis agus le spiorad fial daonnachta.

[Today we are all charged to take on our own responsibilities in imagining and building a Republic in the fullest sense, institutional and experiential, one of which our founders would be proud; truly representative of a nation rooted in courage, vision and a profound spirit of generous humanity.]